

THE POET IN THE MARKET-PLACE

Houston, Margaret Belle, 1874-1940

About the City's Market-place

The pliant throngs press out and In.
The seller lifts an eager face
And cries his wares above the din.

Here are the stalls of sunny fruit,
Crimson and cool and purple-veined,
And here are piled with mouths too mute
Bright birds with soft breasts newly-stained.

Here is the booth where one beats gold
To twinkling rings or shining bands.
And here are glistening, fold on fold.
The silken looms of sunrise lands.

Here are the vats of ripened wine.
Joy! sings a voice, for him who quaffs!
And here one leans and flings a coin.
And laughs and drinks, and drinks and laughs.

And flitting bright, from stall to stall.
Too beautiful, with eyes of fire,
A woman, smiling light on all,
Offers her painted lips for hire.

About the City's Market-place
The changing throngs pour out and in.
But one there is with lifted face
Cries not his wares above the din.

Apart he sits, and all alone
Beside the Market's outer stalls.
Watching the sun drift o'er the stone
And spread a rainbow down the walls.

Strange ware hath he! A lamp that glows
With sun-pure light, whose flame doth start
In oil of tears. A folded rose
Sprung from the dust of Helen's heart.

The wind-cry of a wandering shell,
A font of moonlight from the South,
A draft of heaven with dregs of hell —
This kiss from Cleopatra's mouth.

The nightingale's last note at eve
Cloven with rapture's swift assail.
A faery scarf of misty weave
Powdered with star-dust, bright and pale.

And ah! (That few may know or see)
Closed in this casket carved and sweet,
Garnered in gloom of Calvary —
The drops that fell from Jesu's feet.

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Lo! Quiet holds the Market-place.
The booths loom dark, a barren line.
The woman with the painted face
Goes forth with him who quaffed the wine.

And he that sitteth all alone
Looks sudden on an empty street.
(The sun hath trailed adown the stone
Dropping the rainbow at his feet.)

He smiles — he sighs — the day is done!
How many passed his laden stall!
How many saw there — every one —
Some folded parchments — that was all!

Ah, Christ! The cruel Market-place!
My Brother! (Soft! A tardy buyer!)
The woman with the painted face
Looks down in his with eyes of fire.

*My Brother! (Canst thou then deny
Thou art of closest kin with me!)
Of all the throngs that came to buy
Thank God that no man bought of thee!*

*Tho' Sorrow take her burning toll,
Tho' Hunger keep thee, hand in hand,
Thou hast not bartered half thy soul
To him who doth not understand!*